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The Union Ticket¹

By BJ Thomason

Pilgrim and Harvey arrived in a cloud of steam at Parkes siding early that August evening in 1895. They detrained with Cavalier and the dog and secured their bags to Cavalier's saddle, and then they stood back from the wheels as the train whistle let off a melancholy moan. It heaved away from the platform, gradually picking up speed as it chugged off. Tommy barked the deep, hoarse bark of a mongrel, his oversized head bobbing up and down. They watched until all they could see was a dot on the tracks in the distance.

Parkes was silent until the locomotive was gone, and then the town seemed to breathe out. Insects came to life. First one cicada. Then two. And then a chorus. Pilgrim, also, let out his breath.

'We'll camp on the Goobang for tonight. C'mon, Harvey. We have to hurry.'

Pilgrim looked around. He supposed he would have to get a union ticket for the boy, but the evening was moving in and the town was a mile in the opposite direction from where they had to travel to that night. And what would anyone do to a boy? he thought. They're a heartless mob, but a scrawny boy of fourteen couldn't stir a teacup let alone incite a union row. It wouldn't matter. He breathed the air and got a whiff of grease lifting off the dirt between the tacks.

He waited while Harvey looked around; he could almost hear the grind of the boy's mind working over the details of the bush. Harvey would gaze at a spot in the distance, look around some more and then return his gaze to the same spot as if mentally measuring the distance between the horizon and the fence line. Sunlight shone from behind the boy highlighting tufts of hair and making his ears glow red. What a gentle lad, so softly spoken and aged by grief. So much of my brother in him, Pilgrim thought. And Pilgrim felt emotion rising up through his chest as he saw, in his mind, Harvey's dear dad as boy.

Across from the siding was a stockyard, and further on, the paddock where Parkes held its annual gymkhana. Patches of ground were worn bare and trenches were grooved into the earth where the markers would be placed for the barrel race. The last time Pilgrim had been in Parkes, he was thrown from a buckjumper in that very paddock and dislocated his shoulder.

He turned to the east and led Harvey and Cavalier away from the train stop. A little way along, he found the track that left the road and led across a sheep paddock and up toward a line of trees that grew on the other side of the boundary fence, along the Goobang Creek.

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As they left the town behind, the countryside wrapped itself around them. Harvey started to whistle, and Pilgrim made up lines of verse and memorised them so that he could write them down later for *The Bulletin*. The rhythm of his pace led the cadence of his lines and the chirrup of cicadas throbbed around them.

Pilgrim walked toward the eastern sky watching the colour change from raspberry to orange before settling for a pale yellow. The black silhouette of a line of coolabah trees scratched at the sky along the eastern border of the paddock and then, about half a mile on, the shearing shed. The shearers' quarters were further back, huddled amongst a stand of straggly gum trees: two rows of hot tin shanties with cement wash tubs between them and a clothes line strung between T-shaped props. Pilgrim looked across, expectantly. A job, perhaps. But the clotheslines hung empty. The paddock lay flat and dull as stale bread. The shed was cold.

But then, the bleat of a newborn lamb cut the air. Its mother called, softly. Pilgrim squinted and then saw what he'd mistaken for a patch of bare, dull earth. The yard near the shearing shed was full. A sad grey cloud of unshorn sheep moved in unison.

Pilgrim and Harvey paced, steadily across the hard ground, crunching dried grass underfoot until Harvey's comforting whistling became infectious. The words of 'The Dying Stockman' invaded Pilgrim's thoughts. He forgot about his poems and sang, instead.

'Wrap me up in my well-worn old blanket,
And lay me in peace down below,
And tell all the old mates that knew me,
That I've gone where all good fellows go.'

They walked and sang. Just before reaching the line of gum trees, they climbed over the fence and entered a strip of low mallee scrub. Something stirred in the undergrowth. A snake, perhaps. Pilgrim shivered.

As they moved down to the creek, he started to remember familiar landmarks: the question-mark tree with the warped trunk, the black stump. In the valley, the trees were bigger and, this evening, were full of sulphur-crested cockatoos that fluffed their wings and squawked, throwing down leaves and strips of bark.

Pilgrim glared up at the branches. 'Shut uuup!'

Finally, they were near enough to the creek and Pilgrim smelled the muddy water stirred by Murray turtles. Low in the valley of the Goobang Creek, away from the sounds of civilization, the train long gone, he felt lighter, free at last of the city.

Just on dusk, the last smudge of sunlight faded from the sky. The air was cooler in the valley where Pilgrim swiftly searched around and found a clearing in a flat beside the creek. He scurried around, plucking up dead sticks to use as firewood.

He'd been so engrossed in gathering wood that it was dark before he noticed Harvey was missing. He threw down the last armful of wood onto the pile. Pilgrim looked up. He could just make out Harvey's shape from behind, up the creek bank, on a tailings dump, sitting cross-legged with his back pressed against the sapling. Ah, leave him be! he thought. But, he's so little, so damned *skinny*. What will I do with him? How can a boy survive without a mother and a dad to pull him up by the ears? Pilgrim lit the fire. Made some damper. Boiled the quart-pot and tossed a handful of tea and a gum leaf into the bubbling water.

Morning came, gum-scented and fresh. Pilgrim was disorientated at first. Despite the hard ground underneath his back, he'd slept deeply and dreamlessly and was confused when his eyes focussed on gum-leaves instead of the usual peeling paint that he had seen for the seven months he'd spent in Sydney. Instead of an alarm clock, his wake-up call was a kookaburra. He sat up.

Harvey was sitting up beside the cold, black remains of the campfire with his blanket tucked around his belly. A stray dog was licking at his bare feet. Harvey giggled, squirming from side to side, while Tommy, not amused, stood back alternately growling at the stray and whimpering at Harvey.

'Hey Tommy. Come here, boy,' Harvey said, but his hands were reaching for the stray at his feet. Tommy barked a pathetic, jealous reply that set Harvey off again in a hysterical bout of laughter.

Pilgrim experienced the scene as keenly as a man who might watch a son and felt it deep in his belly as though Harvey was his own flesh and blood. It was right to see the boy's face happy, finally, and he'd have given anything to make it last, but a stray dog was not a welcome sight. Harvey would learn that, in time.

From down in the creek he heard a clanking and a splashing.

'We'd better pack up.' He stood up quickly. 'We've camped on somebody's claim.'

Harvey ignored him, grabbing for the dog who played back and forth, skittling just out of reach. It was a strange dog. It had the straight snout of the foxhound. Harvey caught the dog by one floppy ear and dragged it forward and then twisted the ear around his fingers until the dog submitted, lying on its back to bare her belly. Tommy moved forward and sniffed.

Suddenly, the stray jumped and the two dogs pelted toward the paddock.

Pilgrim watched them disappear. Harvey, still chuckling rolled his blanket and tied a piece of string around the bundle.

‘We’d better investigate,’ Pilgrim said, securing his own blanket to Cavalier’s saddle, and then he turned to walk down the bank to the waters’ edge. Cavalier, trailing behind him, snorted flies out of his nostrils while Harvey hopped along on one foot, pulling his boot on to the other.

Upstream a man stood, knee-deep, in the muddy creek. He was gazing up the bank with his hands cupped around his mouth.

‘Bettah!’ He called. He whistled.

The man’s shovel was pushed into the creek bank, and Pilgrim went over and leaned on the handle.

‘Hallo,’ Pilgrim said. ‘Any gold down there?’

Tommy and the stray bolted past, ker-splash into the water, yapping insanely. The miner threw water up in an arc that sprayed all over the dogs. He turned around and waded out of the water and up onto dry land. He sloshed toward Pilgrim, water running in rivulets down his legs. Pilgrim reached forward. They shook hands.

‘Nicker,’ said the man.

‘Pilgrim.’ He twisted around nodded toward Cavalier and Harvey. ‘The boy’s called Harvey. We’ve escaped from the city for a spell. Boy’s mother died a month back. Childbirth. Left him an orphan. My brother’s lad he is ... was anyhow. Both of them dead.’

Nicker stared apologetically at Harvey, who side on looked more like a stick insect than a human. He shook his head, picked up the shovel and washed it in the creek. Pilgrim stood back.

Nicker scrubbed at the shovel for a moment, lifted it, inspected the blade, and then spoke, almost absentmindedly. ‘Can you shear?’ he asked.

‘Barely, but I’ll give anything a go.’

‘What about the boy. Can he roustabout?’

Pilgrim nodded ... shrugged.

Nicker glared up at him, squinting into the sun, rising behind the banks. ‘You got a union ticket?’

Pilgrim hesitated. Damn the union! He wasn't interested in burning down woolsheds or paddleboats, or holding towns to ransom.

'I *said*,' Nicker growled, 'are you with the union?'

Pilgrim nodded. 'Yes. I'm with the union.'

'All right then. I'll teach your boy here how to throw a fleece. And you can add your tally to mine until we're square for the lessons,' Nicker said. He grabbed at his hips. 'The boy works for half wages until he's quick on the floor.' He shook his head again. 'We start the Parkes shed on Monday. Know where that is?'

Pilgrim nodded.

'There're two months in it since the district shares the shed, so be ready for the long haul.'

Pilgrim shifted his weight. Monday! There'd be no time to arrange a ticket for Harvey before the shed cut in. But, ah, he thought. What harm could a boy cause in any case? It wasn't as though he'd be doing any real work or taking a job away from a member. Look at him. Poor little runt. What would it matter?

'Hey!' Nicker glared at Tommy. 'Keep that *mongrel* away from my pedigree. I don't want any half-wit pups.'

'It's Harvey's dog,' Pilgrim said. 'But I'll tell him to keep them apart.'

Nicker grunted and strode over and hooked the panning dish onto the handle of his shovel and swung it over his back. 'If it's not blarsted scabs, it's larrikins from the city,' he said. 'I've got rocks in me head.'

Two months passed slowly. By the end of it, Pilgrim had remembered how shearing made every muscle in his body hurt. Finally, though, the shed was nearly finished.

The last of the sheep fidgeted in the catching pens, and the number diminished one by one, the pen no longer being constantly re-filled by the roustabouts. Nicker pulled the last ewe out. He held her to the floor between his knees and pulled on the rope. The handpiece jumped and bounced on the floor and, as Nicker snatched it up and started to shear the last sheep, Pilgrim felt his body responding to the thought of some time off. The wool fell down in a long shawl off the ewe's back. There was no sign of a ridge along the fleece; Nicker's even blows let it fold back in a wave as smooth as a woven blanket. The ewe fell limp, her head lolled to the side, lulled by the vibrations of the combs and cutters along the length of her body. Nicker propped the ewe against his knees and ran his hand along her spine, gently using his fingertips to lift the wool away from her. She lifted her

head and looked up at Nicker's face as he reached for the rope to stop the motor. The motor growled down. Nicker hoisted the ewe under the front legs, slid her on her back across the floor, and turned her in to the chute. She kicked once as she left the shed.

Pilgrim's body slumped in the sudden, stark silence. The new machines were fast, of course, but their constant drone had permeated his very being, just as the vibrations had lulled the ewe until that moment, at cut-out, when the contrasting silence almost jarred. The last time the ewes were shorn, Pilgrim realised, they would have been shorn by hand shears. All they would have heard was the click, click, click snipping about their ears.

Pilgrim touched his pocket. He felt for his union ticket.

The manager kept his nose down over the tally book, and in the way the hand that held the pencil shook, Pilgrim knew he was worried. His face was pale. Nobody could forget the *Rodney*. It was always floating through the backs of their minds, the smell of burning wool and flesh forever permeated in their clothing, mud on the soles of their moccasins.

Nicker never spoke of it. He wouldn't. All of Nicker's friends swore Nicker had been in Sydney in last August when the steamer loaded with wool from a non-union shed was burned to the waterline on its way down from Bourke. The effects of the sinking of the *Rodney* rippled through time, so that when the shed cut out, the team was on edge. No blacklegs. No scabs in 'ere. Pilgrim held his breath. The boss, in his tan-coloured pants and waistcoat, sucked the lead of his pencil and glanced up at the tally board and then at his notebook. The wool table tilted, like it might overbalance, as the shiny booted pastoralist lowered his tidy backside to sit on its edge. Almost unconsciously, and without looking up, the manager readjusted his seat and then concentrated more deeply on his book as though his life depended on it.

Over in the corner, the wool-classer agitated the wool in the bales, lifting a handful to examine it close to his face, plucking a thin strand of wool and stretching it between his fingers, tugging until it broke, minutely stroking and counting the ridges. He dove his arm deep into the bale and coughed. At the sudden sound, the boss glanced up, his clean-shaven face grim. He touched his hat and then bent over his notebook to record a number.

The shearers milled around the tally board as the smell of piss and lanolin settled around them. Their tired arms hung at their sides. They were waiting, keeping half an eye on the man with the pencil, wanting to snatch up their pay packets and run out, shouting 'Sydney here we come!'

The smell of sweat rose as the union representative wandered over to the cocky, his stride self-consciously, overly casual, one hand on a hip. 'Twenty shillings per hundred.' He lowered his eyes and rolled his great bulging shoulder muscles. The manager looked up over his spectacles and nodded.

‘They all got tickets?’

Nicker nodded.

Pilgrim turned away.

Through the opening at the side of the shed, he saw that the sun was throbbing redly on the horizon. He pictured himself walking off into the sunset. He’d run if it came down to it.

While Harvey cleared the last scraps of the wool from the floor, Pilgrim twisted, pushing his hand into the small of his back. He stretched and glanced into the empty pen, where the floor glistened, wet with sheep urine. A hill of sheep dung collected in the corner where the boards were clogged and it hadn’t fallen through the gaps.

Pilgrim grimaced, unable to ignore the discomfort pulsing through his aching spine, nor was he willing to ignore the throbbing sores that welled around each of the sharp burrs that peppered his hands. A boil festered near his hipbone and aggravated against his clothing. But, it’s over now, he told himself.

From outside the shed Pilgrim heard one long low baaa as Nicker’s last ewe trotted indignant, naked and snow white into the dusty paddock, shivering at the sudden loss of weighty wool. Pilgrim walked to the open side of the shed, and stood on the top step to watch. The ewe looked around for its lamb, baaad again. The ewe began at a trot, and then stopped just as suddenly, confused at the white and red thing that pelted toward her from the holding pen. It was the lamb that had its tail docked.

The docking board wept blood next to a pile of lamb’s tails that looked like woolly snakes. A crow landed on the railings nearby, its feet, click, on the wood that had been polished by blood and wool. It wiped its beak, clack, against the wood, and cawed. Pilgrim turned, startled by the waft of blood-smell that the bird’s flapping wings had disturbed. He blinked and it was gone.

Harvey walked across the paddock. It was over. At last! He was fed up on abuse from the shearers: the shouting, the swearing and the constant down-treading, the derogatory name-calling. In those few short months, how he had come to hate shearing and shearers, and the shearers union men in general with their continuous tirade of hatred toward all but their own kind. His ears were damaged as much by the noise of the Worsley sheep-shearing machines and the shearers’ whistles urging him to ‘hurry up with the tar, boy’, as by the spitefulness that rang out across the land.

Harvey, close to tears of exhaustion, climbed over the fence and gazed back across the paddock toward the shed and he felt the silence, as palpable as jelly, pressing against him.

From across the yard he watched the cook prepare the last meal for some of the shearers who would stay one more night before heading back to Sydney. The cook was bent over a low bench with a bowl of water and vegetables and as though in answer to his wish to escape from it all, Harvey heard Nicker shout out. 'Ey. Tin Lung? You seen me dawg?'

Nicker's whistle chilled Harvey, all the way across the paddock. And then, in just relief, Harvey heard a gentle squeak and looked down. He had found what Nicker was looking for.

Better's body lay under a bush on the other side of the fence where she'd hidden herself to give birth. She was in a soft bed of freshly scratched earth and wool, but she was motionless and stiff. Blood covered her hind legs.

Harvey counted the pups that wriggled blindly at Better's side, nudging for her nipples.

He picked one up. As it wriggled in his hands he knew straight away that it was Tommy's offspring, and he knew why Better had died. Tommy was too big. Just one of the pups would have been too big for Better's body to have borne, and here, she'd given birth to eight.

A full moon tinted the whole town violet; it was so bright that the horses tethered to the railings outside the pub made shadows across the otherwise empty main street of Parkes. The shearers, the drinkers who would head back to Sydney on the morning train, were full of booze and staggering chaos. Inside the pub, Pilgrim kept his head for the sake of the boy who he'd left upstairs to sleep off three months of hard labour. He'd take him back to Sydney in the morning.

In the bar, Nicker met Pilgrim halfway across the room. He held a crumpled hat under Pilgrim's nose. Pilgrim, sensing a fight, tried to step around him, but Nicker stepped back, and with a mad grin, seized the hat between two hands and twisted it.

'Do you want to know where the rest of him is?' Nicker said.

'Who?'

'Your little mate, Harvey.'

Pilgrim stared until the words registered in his mind. What was he doing with Harvey?

'Follow me.' Nicker turned and strode away.

Pilgrim followed. 'What is this, Nicker? What are you on about? We've squared our debts,' he said as he followed. 'We worked hard and we didn't cause any trouble.' Nicker led him around the back of the pub, past the outdoor conveniences.

‘Nicker! What ... ?’

When he rounded the corner, Pilgrim was confronted by two large men, silhouetted in the moonlight; he made out the outline of a small person, slumped between them.

It was Harvey. Harvey looked up, his eyes, glistening with tears. Four more men stood back from the scene, their feet parted, fists clenched. Two of them strode forward and grabbed Pilgrim by the arms.

‘What is this?’

The man on Harvey’s left twisted and forced a punch into Harvey’s stomach. Harvey retched.

‘That’s a start,’ said Nicker.

‘You coward!’ Pilgrim said. He struggled against the grip of the men.

Pilgrim heard the horses and he heard a couple of people walking along the street with their voices lowered. Feet scuffed over gravel.

‘What do you want?’ He asked. ‘What has the boy done?’

Nicker’s eyes narrowed. One of the men, standing nearby, handed Nicker a three-foot length of four-by-two. Nicker stepped toward Harvey.

Pilgrim hollered. ‘No!’

Harvey started to scream. The plank hit him in the face and silenced him. He fell limp between the two men. Nicker raised the plank and struck again.

Pilgrim pulled against the men that were holding him. He struggled so hard that he felt his shoulders pop out of their sockets. He was aware that he was screaming. Nicker threw down the weapon. He swung back his bare fist.

‘And this one’s for Better,’ Nicker yelled, and then, like a single pistol shot, he smashed Harvey’s face.

A loud crack and Harvey fell.

Nicker wiped blood from his hand.

‘There,’ he said. ‘It’s just a little matter. A matter of a union ticket.’